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Betrayals, false alibis, and bungling by the pope's would-be assassins.

# THE GREAT BULGARIAN COVER-UP

BY CLAIRE STERLING

ON MAY 27 three Bulgarians and four Turks will stand trial in the Italian Court of Assizes for conspiring to assassinate Pope John Paul II on May 13, 1981. In the tortuous confession of Mehmet Ali Agca, the convicted gunman in the case, one thing became clear. This painstakingly conceived plot (aimed ultimately at bringing down the Solidarity movement in Poland, and including at one point the murder of Lech Walesa) came undone by the cowardice, stupidity, and mutual betrayals of the accomplices—an assortment of Bulgarian Embassy and secret service personnel; Turkish drug- and gun-runners, professional assassins, Gray Wolves, and Mafia men. In each man's attempt to save himself, he brought further evidence against his comrades. The result was a farcical cover-up attempt scrupulously unveiled by Judge Ilario Martella.

All of the accused lied stoutly to the judge, as did Agca. But the others' testimony fell to pieces under severe magisterial scrutiny; the core of Mehmet Ali Agca's confession held up—despite numerous inconsistencies and even several retractions along the way. Prying the truth out of Agca, imprisoned for life at 23, proved to be an arduous and disconcerting task. To break out of jail by force, he needed the assistance of his Turkish and Bulgarian accomplices. To walk out a free man, he had to betray them: tell everything he knew and hope to win a presidential pardon. He gambled on the pardon, but could not bring himself fully to renounce the other course.

Agca was arrested on May 13, 1981. He held out for a year before naming his Turkish accomplices, and another six months before identifying the Bulgarians, in the conviction that rescue was on the way. During that time, he misled his Italian interrogators, mixing, he said, "some facts with a lot of lies . . . to prevent them from getting near the truth." He later explained that he was keeping a promise made to his friend and fellow gunman Oral Celik, and to the Bulgarians in Rome. In return, "They assured me that they would arrange my escape if I was arrested, by buying off my prison guards, or kidnapping a hostage for exchange."

As the months went by with no sign of deliverance, Agca saw that those he counted on for help were not omnipotent. By the time of the pope's pardon at Christmas 1983, Agca had taken back some of his lies, and he

began to supply new details about the assassination plot. Through the Turkish Mafia boss Bekir Celenk—bound to the Bulgarian secret services after running his arms and drug traffic out of Sofia for 20-odd years—the Bulgarian services hired Agca and Celik to be the hit men. Judge Martella described Agca, who had moved in right-wing Gray Wolves circles since high school, as a "terrorist without ideology," and an "exceptionally gifted killer used for exceptional assignments and paid accordingly." He was to be paid one million deutsche marks (roughly \$400,000) for killing the pope.

Elaborate liaisons were set up between the Bulgarians and Turks, with the Gray Wolves providing safe houses, protective cover, storage of weapons, and petty cash outlays as needed. In July 1980 in Sofia, the plan to kill the pope was roughed out in meetings between Agca, Celenk, Celik, and the treasurer of the Bulgarian Embassy, Todor Aivasov (alias Sotir Kolev). It was perfected later in Zurich and Rome. For the next nine months, Agca set up working contacts across the continent, carefully covering up his movements as he went. It was at the moment of the shooting and in the arrangements for safe flight afterward that the plan broke down.

The assignments were clearly set up in advance. The Gray Wolves leader Omer Bagci would deliver the gun. Agca and Celik would do the shooting. The Bulgarians Aivasov and Zheylvo Vasilev (alias Sotir Petrov) would hire the car (to be driven by Sergei Antonov—alias Bayramic—the deputy director of Balkan Air) and would procure panic bombs with which Celik would distract the crowd for the getaway. At a dinner when these arrangements were discussed, Vasilev first mentioned a detail with damning implications for Bulgaria. He said that a TIR truck (Transport International Routier—a vehicle used to shuttle cargo across borders of European countries without customs clearance) carrying diplomats' household goods would be ready to whisk Agca and Celik out of Italy after the shooting.

On May 13, 1981, Agca and Celik took up their positions at the Vatican in a large crowd gathered for the pope's weekly public audience. Agca was to fire five shots, after which Celik—who could then fire if necessary—would explode the panic bomb. But Agca managed to fire only twice before somebody shoved his shooting arm. Only one of the bullets struck the pope. Celik then fired a third shot, hitting the pope again. But instead of setting off the panic bomb, he simply ran away. ABC's Lowell Newton, a

Claire Sterling is the author of *The Time of the Assassins* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston). This article contains previously unpublished material from the book's new edition.

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